

Laos

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

SECRET/NODIS

INFORMATION

October 6, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

THRU: Robert E. Osgood

FROM: Winston Lord 

SUBJECT: Some Questions on Laos

"A new administration has the right to ask for compassion and understanding from the American people. But it must found its claim not on pat technical answers to difficult issues; it must above all ask the right questions." (HAK, Central Issues of American Foreign Policy.)

Following are a few questions on Laos. They are not meant to be comprehensive or to treat all of the broader issues and estimates. They seek rather to question some basic assumptions, to reopen closed positions, to look at some of the Laotian elements from a different perspective. The incoming intelligence reports and contingency plans will probably deal with some of these questions. Others will be ignored or assumed away. Several of these questions might be treated by desk officers but not by their superiors who clear the papers and represent their agencies at the crucial meetings.

1. Does the President really control our Laos policy?

The normal problems of Presidential control are compounded by the dominant role that the CIA plays in Laos. How autonomous is the CIA in that country? Vang Pao's recent offensives provide just one example. His Meo irregulars have always been a CIA operation. Who has been calling the shots on his overrunning of the Plaine des Jarres -- Souvanna Phouma? Vang Pao? CIA? The President? Has Vang Pao license to grab as much territory as he can (with full U.S. support) regardless of the overall policy implications, not to mention vulnerability to counter-attacks?

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MORI/CDF pgs 1, 3-10 per C03320587

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(SECRET/NODIS ATTACHMENT)

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

October 14, 1969

MEMO FOR: Chuck Herman  
Col. Kennedy  
Roger Morris  
Peter Rodman  
Bill Watts

FROM: Winston Lord *WL*

Attached is a copy of a paper on Laos which *(I think)*  
will serve as basis of discussion at Friday  
Planning Staff meeting.

Attachment  
a/s

(SECRET/NODIS ATTACHMENT)

2. What is the purpose of "our side's" offensives?

What are we and the RLG trying to accomplish? The standard answers are that we seek to maintain the fragile stability of a divided Laos, that we must punish the enemy for their offensives, that we must maintain the morale of RLG (and Thai). Do these answers explain, for example, the extensive inroads on enemy territory that the RLG made in 1966-67, including the Nam Bac Valley which the communists had controlled for ten years? These offensives evoked little response at first, encouraging the RLG to press ahead, dizzy with success. "By the fall of 1967, the RLG had made considerable inroads on territory that the communists held in 1962. The communists finally responded by turning an RLG offensive in the Nam Bac area into a debacle for the government in mid-January 1968." (SNIE, October 1968.) The enemy then went on to administer the worst series of defeats to the RLG since 1961-2. Looking through past NIEs, one sees the same rainy season pattern repeated annually. The RLG takes real estate to compensate for the previous dry season losses and to have more land to be able to give up in the upcoming dry season. Are we clear about the political rationale for these offensives? Do we assess the impact on the other side's moves, particularly when our offensives threaten territory that they have traditionally held? How do we expect the Pathet Lao and Hanoi to write their own NIEs about our side's intentions when we bend the rules of the game in Laos? To quote Ambassador Godley, "Laos must be the only country in the world where military success creates almost as many problems as military failure." Do we consider these problems before supporting RLG offensives?

3. Is there a way to break the wet season - dry season cycle?

With the RLG we are now considering political and diplomatic moves to forestall or divert NVN/PL reaction to our side's recent military successes. This has a familiar ring as one looks at the cables and estimates of past Septembers. And we might expect the same scenario over the next few months as was played out in past dry seasons. Once the other side is reinforced and their LOC's in order, they will retake territory despite our side's military defenses and possible diplomatic maneuvers designed to dissuade them. Next spring the RLG, with our support, will once again gear up for wet season offensives. One can argue that at least this cycle has preserved a partitioned Laos as a buffer, perhaps longer than many expected in 1962. But is this cycle sufficient as a continuing policy for this Administration, especially when everyone agrees that the other side holds the military trump cards? And when the facade of non-war in Laos is being stripped away by a questioning public? Is there a means to break

this cycle or do we let it continue mindlessly? Would the other side respond to tacit restraint or diplomatic approaches by the RLG, or would they merely press their advantage? Would attempts to deescalate or ceasefire in place be any riskier than a continuing cycle of offensives and a policy of military deterrence?

4. How should we judge the NVN/PL intentions this dry season?

We are now worried about, and busily planning for, dry season drives by the other side. The enemy's traditional motives for a seasonal push have been sharpened by Vang Pao's overrunning of the Plaine des Jarres, including Khang Khay, long considered an important communist center. A new element this year may be the desire to underwrite their recent political demands, first set forth in July 1968 and since amplified. These add up to an insistence that their stooge neutralists, not Souvanna, represent the "center" in any tripartite arrangement and recognition of other "current realities" since 1962, such as changes in territorial demarcations. The more the other side can decimate Souvanna's neutralists, the more it can claim that its forces include the real center, as well as the left, of Lao politics. In addition, Hanoi might tweak us in Laos to make us flinch in Paris. Reading the mood in this country, they probably have less fear of a sharp U.S. military response to their drives.

In this context, there are estimates that an additional 12,000 North Vietnamese troops may be entering Laos. Leaving aside the fact that one might question whether there is a firm basis for such an estimate, this figure corresponds roughly to past NVN movements back into the country as the rains cease. A September 26 State Department INR note says that "Royal Lao military successes in the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) and in the southern panhandle are, in our estimation, unlikely to evoke a Communist offensive of such dimensions as to fundamentally alter the terms on which the Laos war has been fought since 1962. Nevertheless, we foresee more intense Communist activities in the upcoming dry season than at any time in the past." (This is not an intelligence community consensus and forthcoming estimates may be more bearish.) This reflects the evocative, cyclical nature of military moves by both sides as discussed previously. It also recalls past estimates of enemy intentions. Thus an August 1965 SNIE stated that: "Whereas we are fairly confident in our judgment that the Communists probably do not intend to initiate any major military action in Laos in the next few months, we are certain that they would react vigorously to any offensive in Laos which they felt seriously threatened the infiltration route to the Viet Cong or moved into territories bordering on the DRV and Communist China." The enemy's 1968 response to the RLG offensives in 1966/67 fulfilled this type of prophecy. Given Vang Pao's

recent advances in enemy territory, it is not surprising that we once again expect an enemy dry season campaign.

This is not to say that our side is always guilty of provocation, or to ignore the other side's encroachments on RLG territory or to predict that they would necessarily show restraint if the RLG did. Nor is there any assurance that this time the enemy might not have more ambitious offensives in mind, given the factors cited above. Past history does suggest, however, that we should not misread NVN/PL intentions or overreact to their moves. As in the past we need not assume that the communist offensive is designed "to fundamentally alter the terms" of the Laos war. We have always worried that they might, knowing that they could. Clearly political intentions, not the military equation, have governed their moves. "Troop movements and attacks on outposts recently reported in South Laos suggest that Communist forces may soon seize Saravene and Attapeu to further secure the overland route between North and South Vietnam. These major outposts are already virtually surrounded and neither would be likely to hold out long under attack." This was written in a May 1962 SNIE, which went on to suggest that the communists would probably not move immediately on the towns. These southern towns have been surrounded by communist forces off and on ever since -- yet they remain in RLG hands.

Such facts are useful to keep in mind as we gauge enemy intentions this time around and plan our reactions. Similarly it is useful to ask how has the map of Laos changed since 1962? Reports over the years might give the non-expert the impression that the communists have made steady territorial inroads in Laos since the 1962 Accords. The blending of communist and "neutralist" territory in 1962 and the changing character of the "neutralists" make it difficult to assess net gains and losses. However, the overall picture today, while it has fluctuated, has not basically changed since the 1962 Geneva agreements. The communists hold somewhat more territory in the South while the RLG (as of now, before the dry season) has made some inroads in the North. "There has been no significant loss of terrain, and indeed, a net gain, over the situation which obtained in 1964" (William Sullivan to HAK memorandum, June 1966). This fact too should tell us something about enemy intentions, given their military capabilities. These intentions may change but we should not assume they are changing when they make their next counter-counteroffensive.

5. What do we do if the NVN/PL actually push to overrun the Mekong Valley or all of Laos?

This is the crunch question on our ultimate decision on Laos. It is certainly a legitimate question since all agree that the enemy could make

such a drive if they wished. "We continue to estimate ... that the combined PL/NVA forces now in Laos have the military capability to reduce the RLG area of control to a few enclaves in fairly short order. They could do so without diverting resources from South Vietnam or drawing significant reinforcements from the North." (October 1968 SNIE.) Yet all the papers on Laos have avoided the issue of our ultimate commitment to Laos, concentrating on deterrence and intermediate steps. In devising means of deterring the enemy, should we not know what we are prepared to do if such deterrence fails? Indeed should not our tactical moves be made against this strategic background? Are we prepared to put in 100,000 to 150,000 U.S. soldiers, the only action that observers believe might be effective in case of an all out enemy push? Would even American troops alter the situation? Or would they achieve only short term victories, pending escalation by Hanoi and the creation of a Vietnam-like quagmire? Our own military advisers oppose the use of U.S. ground forces. Such action would run counter to the thrust of the Guam doctrine, our pullouts from Vietnam and Thailand, the American mood, Cooper Resolution, Symington hearings, etc., etc.

6. Should we increase our military support of the RLG?

A series of measures are being considered to bolster the RLG against coming enemy offensives. The basic premise is that if the enemy's calculations are mixed, some increase in the U.S. input might help to deter them. There are specific questions to be answered about the more modest proposals -- can the equipment be used, will the money get to the right people, etc.? The more dramatic suggestions raise the most serious doubts about their military or psychological effectiveness, their political and diplomatic repercussions, their financial costs. There are the problems, already mentioned, about assessing enemy intentions, tailoring our responses, and perpetuating the military cycle. Furthermore, does any marked escalation by our side make sense in Laos when we know -- and the enemy knows -- that ultimately we would stop short of sending in American troops? Raising the ante would appear dangerous when the opponent knows he can raise back until he drives you out of the game. Against the backdrop of the past year's events in Southeast Asia and this country, our opponents must be more confident than ever about this calculation.

7. How important to us is the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

This is perhaps as heretical a question as those posed for so long about the effectiveness of our bombing of North Vietnam. Certainly our bombing of the Panhandle punishes the North Vietnamese and raises the costs of their

infiltration into South Vietnam. Accurate measurements of the bombing's effectiveness are probably as impossible to get for Laos as they were for North Vietnam. We can expect the Air Force to give us high figures and Systems Analysis to provide low figures. Evidence of the bombing's usefulness is the fact that Hanoi includes this as a precondition to any peace talks on Laos. However, it is absolutely clear that our bombing cannot stop infiltration into South Vietnam, any more than did our bombing of North Vietnam. The recent lower rates of infiltration are due to Hanoi's policy decisions, not our bombing. Hanoi has been and will be prepared to write off whatever costs we inflict in order to infiltrate the men and materials its policy dictates. In this sense the actual degree of our bombing effectiveness is not really crucial. We have to date automatically refused to consider a panhandle bombing halt as part of a package deal on Laos. It is time to question this position. Would a tradeoff of our Trail bombing for a stabilized Laos and thus a buffer for Thailand be in our interest, assuming such a deal was possible? How should we weigh the possibility of stabilizing Laos and therefore insulating Thailand against the current impact of our bombing campaign? Could we engineer a package that would be enforceable? Would we consider partial or temporary cessation, with the option to resume if the other side did not uphold its part of the deal?

8. How much Laotian dirty linen have WE got?

It would be helpful to be -- privately -- a little less self-righteous on the question of violations of the 1962 Geneva Accords. It is not a question of blaming ourselves or ascribing benign motives to Hanoi. Certainly their violations are more blatant than ours -- they have 48,000? (we don't really know and it depends on the season anyway) regular troops in Laos, while our role is essentially supportive and often reactive. The fact remains that we and the Thai are also breaking -- not bending -- the Accords: bombing and tactical air support of RLG troops from Thai and SVN bases; equipment, training, and logistic support of RLG ground and air forces; CIA advising and leading of irregular forces. These actions are at Souvanna's request or concurrence, which lend them some legitimacy. There are other actions, such as Panhandle cross-border raids, that we have conducted without his permission -- some with his cognizance, others without. We can, and should, make the best case possible about Hanoi's culpability. We certainly can set forth a much more persuasive record than the Vietnam one. But let us recognize the handicaps of our own violations, no matter how justifiable, and the pervasive skepticism of world and American opinion that this Administration has inherited from the previous Administration's credibility gap. We can expect such handicaps to muddy the record and lower our score of theological and propaganda points.

9. How can we be candid about our Laotian activities?

There is a growing and correct consensus that we have little choice but to be more candid about our role in Laos. Congress and the newspapers will defoliate our cover. We can either sit back and let the facts be yanked from us slowly, reluctantly, bitterly and thus create this Administration's own credibility gap. Or we can take the initiative: underline our limited objectives; cite Hanoi's violations; stress that our supporting actions respond to these violations and the RLG's requests; blame the Laos situation on the Kennedy-Johnson administrations; and explain that we have been clandestine both because Hanoi has refused to acknowledge its systematic violations of the Geneva Accords and because keeping the war undeclared seemed to offer a better chance to deescalate and stabilize than a polemical, face-involving slugging match with the other side. Above all we should paint North Vietnam (with its 50,000 troops) as the Goliath and the RLG as the David in Laos, the reverse of our side's image in Vietnam. The greater our involvement in Laos, however, the more difficult it is to project the desired image. To make our best case will require declassification of much sensitive information (not unlike our SAFEGUARD campaign) and persuading Souvanna that such candor is necessary.

Assuming we do follow this course, how do we protect Souvanna's position as legitimate head of government in line with the Geneva Accords? Will franker acknowledgment of his and our bending of the Accords tempt (or force) Moscow to withdraw recognition of his titular role and the NVN/PL to completely write him off as a legitimate factor in any future government? Souvanna is crucial both because he is probably the only leader who can hold the non-communist forces together and because he seems to be the only possible figure to head up a new Laos settlement based on revitalized 1962 Accords. Difficult as this latter objective appears, it becomes impossible if the communists withdraw their ambassadors from Vientiane, completely disavow Souvanna and set up their own revolutionary government. These are not arguments against candor about our activities but rather for a sensitivity to the need to preserve Souvanna's legitimacy and to avoid giving the other side a pretext to announce that we have, by our own admission, abrogated the Geneva Accords.

10. Should the Guam doctrine apply to Laos and Thailand?

The President has said that we should not be more concerned about Asian nations' security than they are themselves. The RLG and Thailand have of course registered their concern for the neutrality and independence of Laos. It is difficult to sense much anxiety about Laos among other Asian nations, whether they be Burma and Cambodia (contiguous to Laos and



signatories of the 1962 Accords); Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia (in the immediate vicinity of Laos); or Japan, Korea and the Philippines (allies of the U.S. and Thailand). Should we not test their interests in the fate of Laos and have Souvanna ask them what they would be willing to do in terms of diplomatic efforts and military support? They would be asked to weigh their own courses of action, consult among themselves and then state what they were prepared to do to:

-- exert diplomatic pressures upon Hanoi and Moscow, explaining their concerns over North Vietnamese actions in Laos and their desire to see the 1962 Accords honored.

-- contribute economic or military assistance (not troops) to the RLG if the above diplomatic efforts do not bear fruit.

-- define the precise role they wished the U.S. to play, short of sending in combat forces.

Depending on what the Asians were willing to do themselves we would then indicate our own role in line with the Guam approach. We would not demonstrate a greater concern or take proportionately greater actions to preserve the independence of Laos than what the Asians -- who should have a greater stake -- would do themselves.

The same approach to Asian nations could be applied to support of Thailand. This course of action would implement the Guam doctrine with respect to these countries. It would have to be managed carefully to avoid the appearance of a Clifford/Taylor-type campaign for Asian support at one extreme and a transparent American bug-out from Southeast Asia at the other extreme. The question remains: do we reserve the Guam doctrine for post-Laos and post-Thailand as well as post-Vietnam?

## CONCLUSION

The Laos papers provided by the bureaucracy are likely to lean as follows:

- Satisfaction over the recent RLG military successes, however temporary.
- Predictions that the enemy's counter-offensive will be more extensive than ever before.
- Suggested increases in U.S. military support of the RLG.

- Acknowledgement of the enemy's capability to overrun Laos, coupled with a refusal to face the policy questions this contingency would present us.
- Assumption that our bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is non-negotiable.
- Belief that Hanoi's aggression and our relative innocence will be as clearcut to the world and the American public as in fact they really are.
- Inattention to what other Asian nations should be expected to do in support of Laos and Thailand.

The questions posed above suggest a need to:

- Have a clear policy rationale for our side's military tactics.
- Recognize that a continuing seasonal military cycle in Laos may be riskier than attempts to break that cycle.
- Judge enemy intentions and react to enemy moves on the basis of the past record as well as plausible hypotheses.
- Question marked increases in our military support in light of the other side's ability to overrun the country and our unwillingness to commit American troops.
- Weigh the importance of our Ho Chi Minh Trail bombing against the need to secure a Laotian buffer for Thailand.
- Recognize the problems as well as the necessity for public candor.
- Consider the applicability of the Guam doctrine to Laos and Thailand.

These implications do not add up to a policy. They do suggest that the policies that are likely to be considered might be on the wrong track.

CC: John Holdridge